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I – Facebook – World: How People Relate to Technology and the World through Facebook Use

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses how young Danish adults (18-26 years old) describe and critically reflect on the role of Facebook, the algorithm and the news feed as a way of receiving information and relating to the world. The analysis is based on a critical framework of Feenberg's and Ihde's theoretical work on the relationship between subject, technology and life world. The empirical material is based on ten individual interviews, which were thematically coded. Preliminary findings point towards an omnipresent role for Facebook, which users seem to be critically aware of. While all informants are clearly critical of the role Facebook plays in society, as well as in their daily life, this does not always translate into concrete actions to mitigate, improve or avoid the negative consequences of their individual Facebook use. In conclusion, we suggest that further research focuses on conceptualizing the emancipatory potential of a more direct relation with Facebook as a conceptual other, rather than understanding Facebook as a simple technology through which information about and experience with the world is simply facilitated.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human-computer-interaction** → Empirical studies in HCI • **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing** → Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms

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KEYWORDS

Social media, Facebook, HCI, Algorithms, media use

1 INTRODUCTION

The past two years have been tumultuous for Facebook, which has experienced heavy criticism relating to the core functionality of its services and the role of the news feed algorithm in the networked flow and distribution of misinformation and political propaganda. In response to heavy criticism, Facebook announced that they would be making major changes in the way the algorithm prioritizes the content the user sees in their news feed [1]. An important milestone was set in late 2016 when Zuckerberg stated that it would be “crazy” to think that Facebook played a major role in the American election, a statement for which he later expressed regret [2]. Since then, Facebook has started a long line of initiatives aimed at limiting foreign influence over national election campaigns as well as reducing the general presence of propaganda and misinformation in the news feed worldwide [3]. Most recently, in early 2018, Facebook announced that it was making major changes in the way the news feed algorithm presents meaningful content to users by prioritizing local news and content from private profiles over public pages [4].

The organization is slowly acknowledging its responsibility and role as one of the largest media companies mediating the lives of many people worldwide. One part of this process is realizing that there are major issues in achieving their goal of “making the world more open and connected” [5]. It seems networked information flows may require more value-based moderation and curation in order to ensure that false and/or harmful content does not spread globally. Even though it is positive that Facebook is changing the platform to reduce negative impacts on users and society as a whole, this leads us to other questions, such as: can users rely on Facebook to improve the flow of information, or should users instead exert their agency by actively adapting their personal news feed? What options do users have for shaping and resisting undesired aspects of the platform? Are users motivated to change their behavior based on personal, social, societal or political values? Have the many recent issues and public debates about

Facebook made users critical of the platform? Investigating these questions in a Danish context is the overall aim of this study. In the following, we present the theoretical frame as well as preliminary findings of the ongoing study.

2 THEORETICAL APPROACH

A number of studies investigate how users relate to social media platforms and algorithms. Gillespie argues that algorithms are presenting new public spheres, which come into being based on complex calculations that he calls calculated publics [6]. Bucher argues that, even though users may not know the algorithm, they create algorithmic imaginaries through everyday use [7]. Tiidenberg et al. present how users refer to various grand narratives such as addiction, when describing their relation with social media [8]. Eslami et al. address the issue of invisible algorithms. They argue that users can learn to become more aware of the algorithm, which in turn can enhance their feeling of control [9]. In sum, many studies highlight the importance of understanding how users relate to social media as technology and particular the role of the algorithm in everyday use. Our study contributes to this body of work by addressing Facebook use as a technological relation.

The theoretical frame of this paper is derived from Feenberg's critical theory of technology [10] as well as Bakardjieva's approach to critical phenomenology [11] as a way of framing the relation between human and technology. Feenberg combines general concepts from SCOT (Social Construction of Technology) theory with Marxist critical theory. He argues that research on technology needs to understand the broader social context in which it is embedded. He further insists on the emancipatory potential of uncovering power relations and imbalances between technology, designers, and users. Feenberg draws on some of the core aspects of SCOT theory to analyze how technology is embedded in a social context, such as the concept of interpretative flexibility of technology [12]. This concept describes how technology usually develops from a state of early interpretative flexibility, when it is not entirely clear what the future role and purpose of a new technology will be, into a state of stabilization at a later stage, when technology may be taken more for granted and be even less present to people who routinely use a variety of technologies in their everyday life. At later stages, technologies may become hidden and obscure as they are taken for granted and treated as neutral tools rather than continuously being scrutinized for their role and impact on daily life.

As an approach to understanding the relation between human and technology, we will explore the various ways of engaging with technology, such as: 1) a way of communicating through and with technology; and 2) a way of relating to a separate "other". We draw here on Ihde's work from "Technology and the Lifeworld" [13] in order to describe the

relationship between subject, technology and life world. Ihde presents these relations as a variation on the simple model: I – technology – world. According to Ihde, there are various ways of relating to technology and the world ranging from *embodied relations*, where technology is understood as extensions of bodily functions, to *hermeneutic relations*, when technology is interpreting the world, which in turn requires a form of decoding, to the *alterity relation*, where users engage directly with technology as a separate entity, and finally the *hidden relation*, where technology may be influencing the user without the user's awareness.

These different relationships to technology analyze how users describe the role of Facebook as a technological mediator between the user and the world. We wish to explore how the user is able to reflect on and even manipulate the role of the platform in their everyday life. Agency of use in our study is based on the assumption that people need to be able to describe and reflect on Facebook as a separate entity and relevant actor that is not only providing information about the world but also shaping their view of the world on a day-to-day basis. Without this understanding, Facebook will have greater power to shape or manipulate the user according to organizational goals based on values of maximizing information sharing, connectivity and economic growth.

The premise of this study is therefore that it is important that the user is able to critically reflect on the role of the social media platform in their everyday life and further feel enabled to take concrete actions, should they wish to do so, in order to adapt and improve the way the platform is presenting information about the world to them.

3 METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

This qualitative study is based on individual, semi-structured interviews with young Danish adults between 18 and 26 years of age. We chose study participants according to age, educational background and gender. This being said, we interviewed 4 males and 6 females, two Bachelor's students, one not currently in formal education, six high school students (gymnasium) and one from university college (professionshøjskole). The interview guideline was divided into four parts: (1) General media use, (2) News and relevant information in the news feed, (3) Engagement via shares, comments and likes and (4) Personal and political ideals. The interviews started and ended with a general discussion on the role of Facebook in the everyday life of the informant. In Part 1 we asked general questions related to how the informants receive news and keep themselves informed. We were especially interested in their media routines and related thoughts. Then, in Part 2, we asked them to take a look at their news feed and describe the specific content to us. We took this as a starting point to discuss what constitutes meaningful content to them, and how Facebook was able to provide this. In

Part 3 they were asked to take a look at their “activity log” in order to reflect on their specific engagement and activity on the platform, and consequently how these activities related to their personalized news feed and their ability to shape this to their own preference. Based on the activity log, we discussed their engagement on Facebook via shares, comments and likes and what their general thoughts were in this regard. Finally, in Part 4, we asked our informants to reflect on their Facebook use in relation to their personal needs and societal needs. The quotes in this paper have been translated from Danish to English by us, and the names of our informants appear as pseudonyms.

At the time of writing, this study is based on ten individual interviews, each approx. one hour long. We are continuing to collect data and expect to collect at least twice the number of interviews before reaching a satisfactory point of saturation. All interviews are transcribed and coded thematically. The coding process followed an abductive reasoning [14] because our analysis and coding process was loosely inspired by Ihde’s framework for technology and the lifeworld after reading through the interviews and considering the various potential theoretical frameworks.

4 DISCUSSION

Overall, the informants in our study are generally aware and critical of the potential negative impact that Facebook may have on society and their daily life. They are clearly used to thinking and talking about these issues with peers in reference to journalistic coverage, discussions with parents and teachers in high school/university, and/or with friends in their spare time. The informants broadly describe Facebook as a malevolent platform in some regards, which is paradoxical since all of them use the platform extensively and every day. The paradox means that there is a disconnection between how reflective and critical users are of the issues with Facebook as an organization and media platform, and how they use it as a technology that mediates their everyday life. This means that, even though our informants are clearly critical of the role that Facebook plays in their life, this critique does not necessarily translate into concrete actions aimed at mitigating or avoiding these negative aspects. Informants mostly approach and accept the platform and the news feed algorithm as inherently problematic, rather than something to be negotiated and challenged through use.

All informants give accounts of trying to manipulate their news feed in various ways but many also describe the most detailed interactions as disappointing, with little change in the overall experience of the news feed algorithm. Instead, most of the active choices and reflections that the informants make or have are at the moment when they decide which page and profile to follow in the first place. Public pages are rarely engaged with afterwards in order to hide or unfollow sources that are not generating meaningful content to them. The list of

pages that people follow therefore serves as an archive over which the informants have little overview. They related to these pages through the sporadic visibility of particular content in their news feed, presented on the basis of algorithmic performance. In other words, the informants are largely putting their faith in the algorithm to sort and filter their daily news feed. As Cate says when asked about how she would find information without Facebook: “I would lose a lot of things, particularly news. You would have to remind yourself to manually go to each website to see what is going on in the world. You really would have to make some choices. Whereas now I made some choices at one point, but I quickly forget about those choices. Now I just scroll down and follow everything on my wall” (Cate, 23).

4.1 Habitual small-scale engagement

Informants describe their daily use of the platform as habitual behavior. They routinely go to Facebook several times a day to unwind, relax or think about something other than their current and perhaps more complex task at hand, rather than going purposefully onto Facebook to find something or achieve a particularly important or clearly defined goal. The less goal-oriented use of Facebook and the news feed means that it may be more difficult to criticize specific parts of the technology. Most often the informants are not using Facebook as a tool to achieve a specific task but rather as a tool to avoid other more boring or complicated tasks. Informant Emma describes a typical situation when Facebook is used as follows: “If you have writer’s block and you have been there for two and a half hours with the same five lines, and just then it just seems easy to go on [Facebook] and unplug the brain and read something else or watch a video or something.” (Eva, 22)

The informants are, however, generally downplaying the role of Facebook and the amount of time spent on the platform in relation to other and newer platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, which are described as more fun and creative. This is also the case in terms of perceived activity and engagement with the platform. Most informants state that they do not often engage in explicit sharing activities on Facebook such as posting status updates or sharing content. On the other hand, they often describe a wide variety of active engagement other than sharing, such as liking and commenting on posts. Tagging people in the comments sections, for instance, is very common. There is therefore a discrepancy between the experience and narrative of what constitutes active engagement on Facebook as interpreted by the users, and the wider range of activities and engagement that is actually influencing the algorithm and distribution of information to Facebook and the networked audience. For instance, liking, commenting and tagging people can be seen as a type of sharing activity since this activity is presented to selected users in their social network and treated as important feedback to the algorithm that shapes the news feed. Paradoxically, many informants describe Facebook as a

big time waster, although they also do not think they use the platform very much. As Cate says: "Everything is tailor-made for you, literally! But that also means that is a huge time waster" (Cate, 23). Conceptually, it seems that there is potential for widening the concept of use and active engagement on a social media platform both in terms of research framework and user awareness.

4.2 Relating through technology

The informants generally know that Facebook is an actor that plays an important role in how they encounter the world and receive information during the day. Looking at Ihde's framework, they realize that Facebook is clearly mediating their social life world and curating their daily information consumption. Facebook is not hidden as such in this relation, since users are aware of the platform's role in society, but they are less aware of its concrete role in their everyday use, and particularly of how to mitigate or change the negative aspects of the platform in their everyday life.

Facebook is most clearly acting as an embodied relation that extends communicative abilities and connection with other people in a social network. Vincent states in this relation: "It is also very nice that you can see some of the funny videos and laugh a little and just tag some friends in it and laugh at it and then you can talk about it when you meet and say it was really fun and you can go on like that ..." (Vincent, 19). Everyday communication is often phatic and playful communication, connected to various types of media content, such as funny videos and memes. Facebook events also play a big role in the news feed of most informants. The platform creates useful transparency about relevant social events that users generally appreciate and find very helpful. Based on these experiences, many users describe a relationship with Facebook that is largely embodied, socially and perceptually, since the platform is extending social communication abilities in a way that is generally appreciated and useful.

A hermeneutic relation with Facebook is also present through the various representations of codes such as blinking notifications, likes, comments, and shares. The Facebook interface represents abstract values relating to social interactions and points of interest that require some element of interpretation in order to understand what these functions do and represent in terms of communicating about and with the social world. Some design affordances are particular to Facebook, such as the like button. The informants are aware of the various potential for engagement with the interface but they are also able to resist some of the suggestive functions. For instance, the status update, which is presented centrally on the landing page as a core part of the service, is generally not considered either interesting or useful. The informants do not post status updates often, or rather, they take this type of behavior elsewhere to other social media platforms such as

Instagram and Snapchat. Andrea states: "I do not really use Facebook to write how I am or what I am doing. It's actually not very popular amongst young people (...), and if I want to see what my friends are doing then I check Snapchat to see their stories or Instagram to see what kind of pictures they are putting out and who they are with" (Andrea, 18).

Facebook's like button is instead considered very useful to provide easy access to phatic communication, which is the core purpose of use according to all informants. Commenting is also something that is actively engaged in and some informants consider this a very helpful social layer to frame and contextualize content they encounter in their news feed. Sharing content through the share button and to the wider network is less common since the audience is too broad. Instead, some informants prefer to send a direct message with the attached post directly to people in their network who might be interested. Tagging is also a useful way to highlight particular people and draw their attention to specific content, without necessarily letting everyone in the social network know about it. The users rely on Facebook to present the action to relevant actors. They know that a secondary audience in their network will be exposed to these activities when they like a post on Facebook, and they accept the social spillover effect as these actions spread algorithmically to selected users in their network. Sometimes the awareness of the broader social context will cause informants to refrain from liking content but mostly they do not think about this wider and secondary audience. Liking and commenting is mostly an activity directed between one sender and one receiver understood as two human actors. In terms of the hermeneutic relationship required to understand and use the design of Facebook, the informants have a relatively simple interpretation of the abstract features, such as liking, which they mostly interpret when relating to one or a few people in their closest social circle. Informants generally do not think that much about the wider potential audience in their social network that they may be communicating to through liking and commenting on content.

4.3 Relating to technology: The alterity relation

Thus far we have presented aspects of embodied and hermeneutic relations between user, technology and the world. The last of Ihde's relationships that we want to highlight is the alterity relation, which is when technology appears as an explicit "other" in direct relation to the user. Although we have found that the informants are very aware of the general role Facebook may play in society, including the potential negative impact, they are far less reflective on how to counteract these issues in or with the system. For instance, liking a post will make you see more of this content, given the way that the algorithm is constructed. This feature and relation is experienced mostly as a relationship between sender and receiver that is user-user but not in relation to Facebook and

the algorithm, which this activity also feeds into. Users have a wide variety of options when relating to Facebook that are in turn shaping their news feed as well as the news feed of their social network. There is vast potential here for further reflection on the role of the user in relation to the algorithm in everyday life. The informants rarely acknowledge this more direct relationship with Facebook, which in turn has little impact on their everyday activities on the platform. It could be argued that users could have more agency by relating directly to Facebook and acknowledging the technology in front of them through an alterity relation. That is to say, this kind of agency will also require an experience of actual empowerment, calling for a more active relationship with Facebook and an awareness of the technology between the user and the world. If the users do not experience an effect from relating more actively to the platform and the algorithm, they may inevitably return to a more passive role as information consumer, one that relies on Facebook's computational ability to anticipate, understand and ultimately define what constitutes meaningful content in a personalized fashion.

5 PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

This study addresses how a select number of young Danish adults, between the ages of 18-26 years, describe and critically reflect on the role of Facebook, the algorithm and the news feed. Based on the qualitative analysis of ten hour-long interviews, it can be stated that these young Danish adults were generally aware and critical of the role Facebook plays in society and in their everyday life. This critical mindset, however, rarely translates into specific actions such as actively manipulating their news feed. The most reflective moment seems to be the time when a page is liked. Users subsequently largely put their faith in the algorithmic selection processes. As such, the use of Facebook can be described as habitual, with the news feed as the general point of entry. The informants engage only rarely in sharing activities such as writing status updates or sharing content.

On an everyday basis, the platform's technology seems to remain mostly in the background in the users' minds, as they are more engaged in the actual content they receive and less on the daily calculations that are the basis of this particular content, as well as their own activities that feeds into it. In relation to the outlined theoretical framework, it can be stated that the interviewees often describe their relationship with Facebook as an embodied technology that is extending their social reach into the world. Although they are generally aware of the potentially negative consequences of the platform, they mostly look through the technology to the social world, because that is most meaningful to them.

We believe that there is potential to further explore how a more direct and interactive relationship with Facebook as a concrete and conceptual other may have an emancipatory

effect. This relation is similar to the type of relation that Ihde calls the alterity relation. This could help to define a more deliberate use of Facebook as a mediator in the relation: I – technology – world. We would like to highlight that this is an analysis in progress, and we are continuing to develop the framework on the basis of deeper readings of our interviews and continued data collection through interviews with more informants.

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